The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS: Comparative Power Dynamics in Regional Security and Global Economic Multipolarity

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The map of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states presents a striking visual of Eurasia's major powers aligned under a single multilateral framework, prompting the observation that the SCO is "a bit like BRICS." This comparison invites a rigorous examination of two prominent non-Western institutions that have expanded significantly in the twenty-first century. The SCO, evolving from the 1996 Shanghai Five into a formal organization in 2001, centers on security cooperation, counter-terrorism, military confidence-building measures, and political dialogue within its Eurasian domain. BRICS, by contrast, originated as an economic dialogue among emerging markets and has matured into a platform advocating financial multipolarity, development financing, and greater voice for the Global South across continents. Both groupings feature overlapping membership, including China, Russia, India, and Iran, yet they operate with distinct mandates, institutional depths, and geographic scopes. This paper compares their historical origins, membership dynamics, governance structures, and relative strengths in the domains of hard security and economic influence. It explores points of synergy and tension arising from shared participants, evaluates their contributions to regional stability in Eurasia and broader shifts in global governance, and assesses whether they function as complementary pillars or as distinct and occasionally competing expressions of multipolarity. The analysis illuminates the asymmetric distribution of power between a security-focused regional architecture and a globally oriented economic coalition.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, BRICS, multipolar world order, Eurasian geopolitics, regional security cooperation, global economic governance, comparative analysis, emerging powers, Central Asia, de-dollarization, India-China relations.

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1. Historical Foundations and Evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization traces its origins to the complex security environment that emerged in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The newly independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan inherited long and often poorly demarcated borders with China, while Russia retained significant influence across the region. These borders, many of which had been drawn during the Soviet era without regard for ethnic or geographic realities, carried the potential for conflict over territory, water resources, and minority populations. In response, China initiated a series of bilateral and multilateral negotiations aimed at confidence-building and border demilitarization. These talks culminated in the formation of the Shanghai Five mechanism in 1996, comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The group's early agreements focused on reducing military forces along common frontiers, exchanging information on troop deployments, and establishing notification procedures for military exercises. This pragmatic approach succeeded in lowering tensions and created a precedent for regular high-level dialogue among the five states.

By the late 1990s, the Shanghai Five had begun to broaden its agenda beyond border issues. The participating states increasingly recognized that instability in Central Asia—driven by separatism, religious extremism, and transnational crime—posed shared threats that could not be managed through bilateral channels alone. The 1999 and 2000 summits in Bishkek and Dushanbe respectively produced joint statements condemning terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which later became known within the organization as the "three evils." These declarations reflected a convergence of interests: China sought to secure its western frontier and prevent support for Uyghur separatism, while Russia aimed to maintain influence in its near abroad and counter Islamist militancy spilling over from Afghanistan. The Central Asian republics welcomed external backing for their fragile state institutions. The mechanism also began to address economic cooperation, particularly in energy and transportation infrastructure, as a means of fostering stability through development.

The formal transformation of the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization occurred at the summit held in Shanghai on 15 June 2001. On that date, the six founding members—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the newly acceded Uzbekistan—signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the SCO Charter. The Charter, adopted the following year in Saint Petersburg, defined the organization's purposes as strengthening mutual trust and neighborly relations, promoting effective cooperation in politics, economy, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, and environmental protection, and jointly ensuring regional peace, security, and stability. It also established the principle of consensus-based decision-

making and non-interference in internal affairs. The creation of permanent institutions followed swiftly: a Secretariat was established in Beijing to coordinate day-to-day activities, and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was set up in Tashkent to facilitate intelligence sharing and joint operations against the “three evils.”

During its first decade, the SCO concentrated on consolidating its security functions while gradually expanding economic and cultural dimensions. Annual summits rotated among member capitals, and a series of joint military exercises, beginning with “Peace Mission 2003,” demonstrated growing operational coordination. These exercises initially focused on counter-terrorism scenarios but later incorporated broader conventional elements, signaling the organization’s evolution into a platform for military confidence-building among major Eurasian powers. At the same time, the SCO launched initiatives in transport corridors, energy pipelines, and trade facilitation, although progress remained modest compared with security cooperation. The organization also developed relations with observer states, granting observer status to Mongolia in 2004, India, Iran, and Pakistan in 2005, and Afghanistan in 2012, thereby extending its geographic and political reach without immediately altering the core membership.

The period after 2010 witnessed significant institutional maturation alongside ambitious expansion. The SCO adopted a series of long-term development strategies that sought to balance security priorities with economic integration. The 2015 Ufa summit and subsequent declarations emphasized the linkage between security and sustainable development, while member states explored mechanisms for settling trade in national currencies and coordinating responses to external economic shocks. Expansion became a central feature of this phase. In 2017, India and Pakistan acceded as full members, nearly doubling the organization’s population and economic weight while introducing new dynamics of rivalry within the consensus framework. Iran’s accession in 2023 further extended the SCO’s reach into the Middle East and the energy-rich Persian Gulf. Belarus joined as the tenth full member in 2024, bringing the organization’s footprint closer to the European theater. These enlargements transformed the SCO from a compact Central Asian security forum into a genuinely continental body encompassing diverse political systems, economic models, and security concerns.

Throughout its evolution, the SCO has maintained a distinctive emphasis on sovereignty and non-alignment. Unlike traditional military alliances, it has avoided collective defense obligations and instead promoted the principle that each member retains full autonomy in foreign policy. This approach has allowed the organization to accommodate states with divergent alignments while still fostering practical cooperation on issues of common concern. The geographic scope illustrated by maps of current member states—stretching from the Baltic region in the west to the Pacific coast in the east and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean—reflects both the organization’s success in managing post-Soviet border issues and its aspiration to shape the

broader Eurasian security architecture. At the same time, the SCO's historical trajectory reveals a persistent tension between its original narrow focus on the "three evils" and the growing demand from members for deeper economic and connectivity initiatives capable of addressing contemporary challenges such as infrastructure gaps, energy security, and technological competition.

The organization's institutional evolution has also been shaped by the shifting balance of influence among its largest members. China's economic rise has enabled it to propose and fund connectivity projects that align with broader regional integration goals, while Russia has sought to preserve its traditional security role and leverage the SCO as a counterweight to Western institutions. The Central Asian states have used the platform to diversify partnerships and attract investment without becoming overly dependent on any single power. India's accession introduced an additional voice advocating for balanced development and connectivity that respects sovereignty, while Pakistan's membership has added perspectives on South Asian security dynamics. These internal negotiations have produced a flexible yet sometimes slow-moving decision-making process that prioritizes consensus over rapid action.

By the mid-2020s, the SCO had developed into a multilayered institution whose historical foundations in border confidence-building had expanded into a comprehensive framework addressing security, economic, and cultural cooperation across Eurasia. Its evolution demonstrates both the possibilities and the constraints of building multilateralism among states with differing capabilities and strategic cultures. The organization's trajectory—from the pragmatic Shanghai Five talks of the 1990s through formal institutionalization in 2001 and subsequent enlargements—provides essential context for understanding its current role in regional stability and its relationship to other emerging multilateral arrangements. This historical grounding also clarifies why the SCO's geographic and functional profile differs markedly from groupings that originated with primarily economic or global-governance objectives, setting the stage for systematic comparison of their respective strengths and limitations in the contemporary international system.

2. The Genesis and Transformation of BRICS

The concept that would eventually become BRICS first emerged not from diplomatic initiative but from financial analysis. In 2001, economist Jim O'Neill at Goldman Sachs published a research paper highlighting Brazil, Russia, India, and China as four large emerging economies whose combined growth could fundamentally reshape the global economic landscape by the middle of the twenty-first century. The acronym BRIC was coined as a shorthand for this group of countries projected to overtake the G7 economies in aggregate size within a few decades.

Although originally an investment thesis rather than a political project, the idea resonated with policymakers in the four capitals who were already seeking greater voice in international financial institutions dominated by Western powers. The 2008 global financial crisis accelerated this convergence by exposing vulnerabilities in the existing Bretton Woods architecture and creating a shared interest among emerging economies in advocating for reform.

Informal consultations among the foreign ministers of Brazil, Russia, India, and China began on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in 2006. These early exchanges focused on coordinating positions ahead of G20 and IMF meetings, with particular emphasis on increasing the voting shares and leadership opportunities for developing countries. The first standalone BRIC summit took place in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in June 2009, producing a joint statement that called for a more democratic and multipolar international order and for reforms to the international financial system. The 2010 Brasilia summit reinforced these themes and established a pattern of annual leaders' meetings rotating among member countries. At this stage, BRIC remained a relatively loose forum without permanent institutions or a formal charter, relying instead on consensus declarations issued at each summit.

South Africa's accession in 2010 marked the first institutional expansion and transformed the grouping into BRICS. The inclusion of South Africa extended the organization's geographic reach into Africa and added a voice representing the continent's development priorities. It also signaled an intention to move beyond the original economic rationale toward a broader political and developmental platform. The 2011 Sanya summit in China and subsequent meetings began to address issues such as food security, climate change, and sustainable development, while still maintaining the core focus on global economic governance. The creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) at the 2014 Fortaleza summit represented the most concrete institutional achievement of this period. Headquartered in Shanghai with an initial subscribed capital of $50 billion, the NDB was designed to finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects in member countries and other emerging economies, providing an alternative channel to traditional multilateral development banks.

The period between 2015 and 2022 saw BRICS deepen its institutional framework while navigating internal divergences. Annual summits continued to produce detailed declarations on trade, investment, and financial cooperation, including initiatives to promote the use of national currencies in intra-group transactions. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement, also established in 2014, offered a mechanism for members to access liquidity during balance-of-payments pressures. At the same time, the grouping confronted challenges arising from differing national interests and external geopolitical tensions. The 2017 Xiamen summit and later meetings increasingly incorporated political issues, such as terrorism, cybersecurity, and regional conflicts, reflecting the members' desire to coordinate on a wider range of global concerns. BRICS also

began engaging more systematically with other developing countries through outreach mechanisms, although it stopped short of formal enlargement for several years.

The most significant transformation occurred at the 2023 Johannesburg summit, when leaders announced the admission of six new full members effective from January 2024: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina. Although Argentina subsequently declined membership under a new government, the remaining additions substantially increased BRICS's demographic weight, energy resources, and geographic diversity. Egypt and Ethiopia brought additional African representation, while Iran and the Gulf states extended the grouping's presence in the Middle East and enhanced its energy profile. Indonesia joined as the eleventh member in January 2025, further strengthening the organization's Asian dimension and adding one of the world's largest economies by population. These expansions shifted BRICS from a compact club of five major emerging powers into a more heterogeneous coalition representing a significant share of global population and economic output.

Alongside membership growth, BRICS has evolved in its stated ambitions. Early summits concentrated narrowly on reforming the IMF and World Bank and increasing the role of emerging economies in global decision-making. More recent declarations have emphasized the construction of alternative payment systems, the expansion of local-currency trade and investment, and the development of infrastructure connectivity across the Global South. The New Development Bank has grown its lending portfolio and begun to issue bonds denominated in member currencies, contributing to gradual de-dollarization efforts. Political coordination has also intensified, with members using BRICS platforms to articulate common positions on issues ranging from United Nations reform to responses to unilateral sanctions. This broadening of mandate reflects both internal consensus on the need for greater autonomy in international affairs and external perceptions of BRICS as a counterweight to Western-led institutions.

The transformation of BRICS from an investment concept into a functioning multilateral grouping has not been without friction. Differences in economic size, political systems, and foreign policy orientations among members have occasionally complicated consensus. The organization has deliberately avoided creating formal alliance structures or collective security commitments, preserving instead a flexible format that accommodates divergent alignments. This approach has allowed BRICS to expand while maintaining operational cohesion, but it has also limited the depth of integration compared with more institutionalized regional bodies. By the mid-2020s, BRICS had established itself as the principal intergovernmental platform representing the economic and political aspirations of a large segment of the developing world, with annual summits, a development bank, and an expanding network of partnerships that extend its influence beyond the core membership.

The historical trajectory of BRICS—from an economist's forecast through informal ministerial consultations to formal summits and institutional creation—illustrates a distinctive model of multilateralism driven primarily by economic interests and a shared desire for greater influence in global governance. Its evolution has been shaped by successive financial crises, the rise of new economic powers, and the strategic calculations of member states seeking to diversify partnerships. This trajectory stands in contrast to organizations whose origins lie in security concerns and border management, highlighting different pathways through which states have sought to organize cooperation outside traditional Western frameworks. The resulting institutional profile, with its emphasis on development finance and global economic reform rather than military coordination, provides a distinct point of reference for assessing the comparative roles of emerging multilateral arrangements in the contemporary international system.

3. Membership Composition, Expansion, and Inclusion Criteria

The membership profiles of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS reflect fundamentally different geographic orientations and selection logics. The SCO remains a predominantly Eurasian body whose ten full members are concentrated in a contiguous landmass stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific. In contrast, BRICS has developed into a global coalition whose eleven members span four continents and represent a much wider range of economic and demographic profiles. These compositional differences have shaped each organization's operational priorities, institutional culture, and capacity to project influence beyond its core region.

The SCO's foundational membership consisted of six states that signed the organization's founding documents in 2001: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. All six shared long land borders with one another and faced common challenges arising from the post-Soviet reconfiguration of Central Asia. Uzbekistan's accession prior to formal establishment completed the core group of Central Asian republics alongside the two major Eurasian powers. This compact membership facilitated rapid agreement on security protocols and border confidence-building measures. Subsequent expansions have preserved this Eurasian character while gradually enlarging the organization's demographic and strategic weight.

India and Pakistan joined as full members in 2017 following years of observer status. Their accession nearly doubled the SCO's total population and introduced South Asian security dynamics into an organization previously focused on Central Asia and the former Soviet space. Iran acceded in 2023, extending the organization's reach into the energy-rich Persian Gulf and adding a significant Middle Eastern actor with longstanding ties to both Russia and China.

Belarus became the tenth full member in 2024, bringing the SCO's western boundary closer to the European theater and incorporating a state already closely aligned with Russia through other regional structures. Throughout these enlargements, the SCO has maintained a relatively restrictive approach to full membership, emphasizing geographic proximity, shared security concerns, and consensus among existing members.

In addition to full members, the SCO maintains a tiered system of engagement that includes observer states and dialogue partners. Mongolia has held observer status since 2004, while Afghanistan, Belarus (prior to full membership), and Iran (prior to full membership) have also participated at this level. Dialogue partners such as Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, and several others engage on specific issues without full decision-making rights. This graduated structure has allowed the organization to extend its influence and gather information across a wider Eurasian space without immediately altering the core consensus-based decision-making process among full members.

BRICS began with a narrower but economically weightier set of founding participants. The original BRIC grouping comprised Brazil, Russia, India, and China, selected on the basis of their large populations, rapid economic growth trajectories, and potential to influence global markets. South Africa's inclusion in 2010 completed the initial five-member configuration and introduced an explicit African dimension. At this stage, membership criteria remained informal and centered on economic significance combined with a stated commitment to reforming global governance institutions. The organization deliberately avoided rigid accession rules, preferring ad hoc decisions reached by consensus at leaders' summits.

The major expansion announced at the 2023 Johannesburg summit and implemented from 2024 onward significantly altered BRICS's composition and global profile. Egypt and Ethiopia joined as the first new African members beyond South Africa, strengthening the organization's continental representation and adding perspectives from North and East Africa. Iran's accession created an overlap with the SCO while bringing a major energy producer and a state subject to extensive international sanctions into the grouping. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia added Gulf economic and energy power, enhancing BRICS's financial resources and its ability to engage with hydrocarbon markets. Although Argentina was initially invited, it declined membership, illustrating that accession remains contingent on domestic political alignment with the grouping's multipolar orientation. Indonesia's entry in 2025 further consolidated BRICS's presence in Southeast Asia and added one of the world's most populous Muslim-majority democracies.

BRICS has also developed a partner country category that functions similarly to the SCO's observer and dialogue mechanisms. States such as Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Nigeria have been invited to participate in specific summits or working groups without full

membership rights. This flexible outreach allows BRICS to test potential future members and to project influence across additional regions while preserving the core group's decision-making cohesion. The partner mechanism has proven particularly useful for incorporating states that share the grouping's critique of existing global financial architecture but may not yet meet informal thresholds of economic scale or political alignment.

A notable feature of both organizations is the presence of overlapping full members. China, Russia, India, and Iran participate in both the SCO and BRICS. This dual membership creates channels for coordination between the two frameworks while also introducing potential friction when the organizations pursue different priorities or when bilateral tensions among shared members spill over into multilateral settings. Kazakhstan holds full membership in the SCO and partner status in BRICS, illustrating how states can calibrate their engagement according to the distinct mandates of each grouping. These overlaps have become increasingly significant as both organizations have expanded, raising questions about how dual members manage competing or complementary demands on their foreign policy resources.

The criteria for inclusion have remained more explicit in the SCO than in BRICS. SCO accession has consistently required geographic contiguity or strong regional security linkages, demonstrated commitment to combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and acceptance of the organization's consensus-based operating procedures. These requirements have produced a relatively homogeneous regional club despite successive enlargements. BRICS criteria have been more fluid and politically defined, emphasizing economic weight, representation of the Global South, and alignment with the goal of a more multipolar international order. The absence of strict geographic or institutional prerequisites has enabled BRICS to achieve greater global diversity but has also required more intensive diplomatic management of internal differences.

The contrasting membership logics have direct implications for each organization's operational effectiveness and external perception. The SCO's concentrated Eurasian membership and security-focused inclusion standards have facilitated deeper cooperation on border management, counter-terrorism, and military exercises within a defined geographic theater. BRICS's global spread and broader economic-political criteria have produced greater aggregate demographic and economic weight along with enhanced symbolic legitimacy as a voice of the developing world, yet they have also complicated efforts to achieve rapid consensus on detailed policy initiatives. These compositional characteristics set the stage for understanding how each grouping translates its membership base into concrete capabilities in the security and economic domains.

4. Institutional Structures, Governance, and Decision-Making Processes

The institutional architectures of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS embody contrasting approaches to multilateral cooperation. The SCO has developed a relatively dense network of permanent bodies, legal instruments, and bureaucratic mechanisms, reflecting its origins in security cooperation and border management. BRICS, by contrast, has retained a lighter, summit-driven model centered on political coordination and selective institutional creation, particularly in the financial domain. These structural differences shape the speed, scope, and binding character of decisions reached within each grouping and influence their respective capacities to translate declarations into operational outcomes.

The SCO possesses the more elaborate institutional framework of the two organizations. Its foundational Charter, adopted in 2002, established a clear hierarchy of bodies and decision-making procedures. At the apex stands the Council of Heads of State, which convenes annually for the organization's main summit and adopts the most significant political declarations and strategic documents. Below this level operates the Council of Heads of Government, responsible for economic and functional cooperation, along with specialized ministerial councils covering foreign affairs, defense, economy, and other sectors. These bodies are supported by a permanent Secretariat headquartered in Beijing, which coordinates day-to-day activities, prepares documentation, and maintains institutional memory across rotating presidencies. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, based in Tashkent, functions as a dedicated operational arm focused on intelligence exchange, counter-terrorism training, and coordination of joint exercises. Additional mechanisms, such as the Business Council and the Interbank Consortium, address economic and financial dimensions, although they remain subordinate to the political organs.

Decision-making within the SCO rests on the principle of consensus. No member possesses veto power in the formal sense, yet the requirement for unanimous agreement effectively grants each full member the capacity to block initiatives that conflict with its core interests. This procedure has preserved cohesion among states with divergent alignments but has also contributed to a measured pace of institutional development and policy implementation. The organization's legal personality, established through the Charter and subsequent agreements, enables it to conclude treaties with third parties and maintain formal relations with other international bodies. Rotating chairmanship, held by each member state for one year, provides opportunities for agenda-setting while distributing leadership responsibilities. Over time, the SCO has supplemented its core institutions with working groups, expert meetings, and ad hoc mechanisms addressing specific issues such as information security, drug trafficking, and transportation corridors.

BRICS has followed a markedly different institutional trajectory. For most of its existence, the grouping operated without a permanent secretariat or standing bureaucracy. Coordination has relied primarily on the sherpa and sous-sherpa system, in which designated officials from each member prepare summit agendas and follow up on commitments. Annual leaders' summits remain the central decision-making forum, producing joint declarations that articulate shared positions on economic, political, and global governance issues. These declarations carry political weight but lack the binding legal force of treaties. The principal permanent institution created by BRICS is the New Development Bank, established in 2014 with headquarters in Shanghai and regional offices in member countries. The NDB possesses its own governance structure, including a Board of Governors and Board of Directors, and operates with a degree of autonomy in project financing that distinguishes it from the broader BRICS political process.

The Contingent Reserve Arrangement, also launched in 2014, provides another layer of institutional capacity, offering liquidity support to members facing short-term balance-of-payments difficulties. Unlike the SCO's comprehensive set of ministerial councils and operational structures, BRICS institutions have remained narrowly focused on financial and development functions. Recent years have witnessed discussions about establishing a more robust secretariat or coordination mechanism, yet the grouping has continued to favor flexibility over formal bureaucracy. Decision-making proceeds through consensus at the leaders' level, with preparatory work conducted through ministerial and sherpa channels. This model has enabled BRICS to accommodate rapid membership expansion and to adjust its agenda in response to shifting global conditions without requiring extensive institutional redesign.

Comparative examination of the two architectures reveals clear trade-offs. The SCO's permanent bodies and legal framework facilitate sustained operational cooperation, particularly in security domains where regular interaction among specialized agencies produces cumulative effects over time. Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing through RATS, and coordinated border management rely on institutional continuity that a purely summit-based model would struggle to sustain. At the same time, the consensus requirement and the organization's emphasis on sovereignty have limited the depth of economic integration and the speed with which new initiatives can be launched. BRICS's lighter structure has permitted greater agility in responding to global economic developments and in expanding membership, yet it has also produced more variable follow-through on summit commitments outside the specific remit of the New Development Bank. The absence of standing bureaucratic capacity has placed heavier demands on individual members' diplomatic resources for coordination between summits.

Both organizations have developed mechanisms for engaging non-member states, though these differ in formality and purpose. The SCO's observer and dialogue partner categories create structured pathways for participation in working groups and ministerial meetings without

granting full decision rights. BRICS has employed a more ad hoc partner country format, inviting selected states to portions of summits or specific initiatives. These outreach arrangements reflect each grouping's strategic environment: the SCO's need to manage a complex Eurasian neighborhood and BRICS's interest in broadening its global constituency. In neither case have these mechanisms evolved into formal accession pipelines with transparent criteria, preserving the core members' control over future composition.

The institutional contrast between the two organizations carries implications for their comparative influence. The SCO's more developed bureaucratic and legal apparatus supports deeper operational collaboration in its primary security domain and provides a stable platform for managing relations among neighboring states with historical sensitivities. BRICS's summit-centric and financially focused institutions have proven effective at generating high-level political signaling and at channeling resources through the New Development Bank, yet they have offered less capacity for sustained operational coordination across the full range of issues on the grouping's agenda. These structural characteristics help explain why the SCO has achieved greater practical integration in security matters within Eurasia while BRICS has exercised more visible influence in global economic discourse. Understanding these institutional foundations is essential for assessing how each organization converts its membership base and mandate into concrete capabilities in subsequent domains of comparison.

5. Security Mandates and Operational Capabilities of the SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was founded with security cooperation as its central mandate, distinguishing it from multilateral arrangements oriented primarily toward economic or political dialogue. From its origins in border confidence-building measures among the Shanghai Five states, the organization has developed a coherent framework for addressing transnational threats across Eurasia. This security focus has shaped its institutional priorities, operational activities, and external perception as a regional stabilizer, even as its membership has expanded and its agenda has broadened to include economic and cultural dimensions.

The foundational security mandate emerged directly from the security vacuum created by the Soviet collapse. The newly independent Central Asian states faced porous borders, weak state institutions, and the spillover of instability from Afghanistan and the broader region. China and Russia shared concerns about separatism and extremism along their frontiers. The Shanghai Five process addressed these challenges through practical agreements on military confidence-building, information exchange, and joint border patrols. These early measures established a pattern of pragmatic, interest-based cooperation that avoided ideological alignment or collective defense commitments. When the SCO was formally established in 2001, its Charter

codified the commitment to jointly combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism—commonly referred to as the "three evils"—as a core purpose alongside the maintenance of regional peace and stability.

The "three evils" framework has provided a flexible yet durable conceptual foundation for SCO security cooperation. Terrorism is understood broadly to encompass both violent acts and the ideological or financial support networks that sustain them. Separatism is framed as a threat to territorial integrity and state sovereignty, resonating with member states' experiences with internal challenges. Extremism is treated as a precursor to violence, justifying preventive measures in education, media, and religious affairs. This tripartite formulation has allowed members with differing domestic contexts—ranging from China's concerns in Xinjiang to Russia's experience in the North Caucasus and Central Asian states' encounters with militant groups—to align on common responses without requiring identical threat assessments. The framework has also facilitated cooperation with observer states and dialogue partners facing similar challenges.

Institutional mechanisms for security cooperation center on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, headquartered in Tashkent since 2004. RATS serves as the primary operational hub for intelligence sharing, database maintenance on terrorist organizations and individuals, and coordination of joint training and exercises. It compiles and disseminates information on terrorist financing, cross-border movement of militants, and emerging threats, enabling member states to take preventive actions. Although RATS lacks independent enforcement powers, its role in standardizing information exchange and building professional networks among security services has contributed to cumulative improvements in regional situational awareness. The structure has expanded its mandate over time to address related issues such as cyber terrorism and the use of information technologies for extremist recruitment.

Joint military exercises constitute the most visible expression of SCO security capabilities. The "Peace Mission" series, initiated in 2003 and held at regular intervals, has evolved from relatively modest counter-terrorism drills to large-scale combined-arms maneuvers involving thousands of troops, advanced equipment, and complex scenarios. These exercises serve multiple purposes: they enhance interoperability among member armed forces, demonstrate collective resolve against common threats, and provide opportunities for confidence-building among states with historical rivalries. Subsequent exercises have incorporated scenarios involving rapid response to terrorist incidents, protection of critical infrastructure, and coordination across air, land, and maritime domains. The participation of all full members, including newer entrants such as India and Pakistan, has tested the organization's ability to manage internal diversity while maintaining operational cohesion.

Beyond exercises and intelligence coordination, the SCO has developed additional security instruments. Regular meetings of defense ministers and chiefs of general staff provide political oversight and strategic direction. Working groups address specific functional areas, including border security, drug trafficking, and organized crime. The organization has also issued joint statements and action plans on countering radicalization and preventing the spread of extremist ideologies through educational and cultural channels. In response to instability in Afghanistan, particularly following the 2021 Taliban takeover, the SCO has intensified focus on border security, refugee flows, and the risk of militant groups using Afghan territory as a base. These efforts have included enhanced coordination among Central Asian members most directly affected by developments on their southern borders.

The expansion of membership has both extended and complicated the SCO's security role. The accession of India and Pakistan in 2017 introduced two nuclear-armed states with a long-standing bilateral rivalry into the security architecture, requiring careful management to prevent the organization from becoming a venue for their disputes. Iran's membership has brought additional perspectives on Middle Eastern security dynamics and energy-related vulnerabilities, while Belarus's accession has added a European dimension and reinforced the organization's western flank. Despite these changes, the core security mandate has remained consistent. New members have accepted the "three evils" framework and participated in RATS activities and exercises, demonstrating the organization's capacity to absorb diverse actors without fundamental alteration of its security orientation.

Operational capabilities, however, remain constrained by structural features of the SCO. Decision-making by consensus means that initiatives requiring deep integration or intrusive verification mechanisms face resistance from members prioritizing sovereignty. Threat perceptions are not uniform: states bordering Afghanistan confront immediate militant risks, while others emphasize domestic extremism or great-power competition. Resource disparities among members affect the scale and sophistication of contributions to joint activities. Nevertheless, the SCO has achieved measurable progress in areas such as information exchange and standardized training that would have been difficult to accomplish through purely bilateral channels. These incremental gains have contributed to a reduction in cross-border militant activity and improved coordination among security services across a strategically vital region.

The security mandate and operational record of the SCO have positioned it as a distinctive actor in Eurasian geopolitics. Its focus on practical cooperation against transnational threats has generated tangible mechanisms that complement, rather than duplicate, the security functions of other regional bodies. At the same time, the organization's emphasis on sovereignty and consensus has preserved space for members to maintain independent security relationships outside the SCO framework. This balance between collective action and national autonomy has

enabled sustained cooperation even as the membership has grown more heterogeneous. The resulting institutional and operational profile provides a clear basis for evaluating the SCO's contribution to regional stability and for comparing its security capabilities with those of organizations that lack comparable mandates or mechanisms.

6. Economic and Financial Architectures in BRICS and the SCO

Economic cooperation has developed along markedly different trajectories in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, reflecting the distinct origins and priorities of each grouping. In the SCO, economic initiatives have remained subordinate to the security mandate, serving primarily as instruments for enhancing regional stability through connectivity and development. BRICS, by contrast, has placed economic and financial cooperation at the center of its agenda, creating dedicated institutions and mechanisms aimed at reshaping global financial governance and expanding development finance outside traditional Western-led channels. These contrasting architectures have produced different capabilities and limitations in translating political declarations into concrete economic outcomes.

Within the SCO, economic cooperation emerged as a secondary but steadily expanding dimension after the organization's founding. The 2001 Charter identified trade, investment, energy, transportation, and environmental protection as areas for joint action, yet early summits devoted far greater attention to security protocols than to detailed economic programs. The first significant economic document, the Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation, was adopted in 2003 and outlined long-term goals for trade facilitation, investment promotion, and infrastructure development. Subsequent plans have emphasized the creation of favorable conditions for cross-border economic activity among member states, with particular focus on energy pipelines, transport corridors, and industrial cooperation. These initiatives have aligned with broader Chinese proposals for Eurasian connectivity while also serving Russian and Central Asian interests in diversifying export routes and attracting investment.

Institutional mechanisms supporting economic cooperation in the SCO remain relatively modest in scope and capacity. The SCO Business Council, established in 2006, brings together representatives of major companies from member states to identify investment opportunities and reduce barriers to commercial activity. The SCO Interbank Consortium, created in the same year, facilitates financing for joint projects through coordinated lending by national development banks. These bodies have supported a range of infrastructure and energy projects, particularly in Central Asia, yet their activities have been constrained by limited capitalization, differing national priorities, and the absence of a dedicated multilateral development bank

comparable to those operating in other regions. Discussions about establishing an SCO Development Bank have continued for several years, reflecting member interest in strengthening financial support for connectivity initiatives, but concrete institutional progress has been slower than in the security domain.

Energy cooperation has constituted one of the more tangible areas of economic activity within the SCO. Member states collectively possess substantial reserves of oil, natural gas, and other resources, and several major pipeline projects have been completed or advanced under the organization's political umbrella. These projects have enhanced energy security for importing members while providing export revenues and transit fees for producer and transit states. At the same time, competition among members for investment and markets, as well as differing approaches to resource governance, has limited the depth of coordinated energy policy. Broader trade facilitation efforts have focused on simplifying customs procedures, harmonizing technical standards, and developing transport corridors that link Central Asia with markets in China, Russia, and beyond. These measures have contributed to growth in intra-SCO trade, although the organization's economic impact remains modest relative to bilateral arrangements and other regional frameworks.

BRICS has constructed a more ambitious and institutionally developed economic and financial architecture. From its earliest summits, the grouping identified reform of the international financial system and increased voice for emerging economies as central objectives. The 2009 Yekaterinburg declaration called for changes in the governance of the IMF and World Bank, while subsequent meetings advanced proposals for greater use of national currencies in international transactions and the creation of alternative payment mechanisms. These positions reflected a shared critique of the existing global financial order and a determination to build parallel structures capable of supporting development priorities in member countries and the wider Global South.

The New Development Bank, established at the 2014 Fortaleza summit, represents the most significant institutional achievement in BRICS economic cooperation. With initial subscribed capital of $50 billion and headquarters in Shanghai, the NDB was designed to finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects in member states and other developing countries. Unlike the SCO's interbank consortium, the NDB possesses independent project appraisal capacity, a diversified lending portfolio, and the ability to issue bonds in member currencies. It has approved numerous projects across energy, transportation, water, and urban development sectors, demonstrating operational functionality that has outpaced many expectations at the time of its creation. The bank's governance structure, with equal voting rights among founding members and provisions for new shareholders, has also served as a model for more equitable multilateral development finance.

Complementing the NDB, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement provides a mechanism for short-term liquidity support among BRICS members. With a total size of $100 billion, the CRA offers an alternative source of emergency financing that reduces reliance on traditional international financial institutions during periods of market stress. Although its utilization has remained limited, the arrangement contributes to the grouping's financial resilience and signals an intention to develop a more comprehensive financial safety net. Parallel efforts to promote local-currency trade and investment have included the development of payment systems and clearing mechanisms that lower transaction costs and reduce exposure to external currency volatility. These initiatives have gained additional momentum amid global discussions of de-dollarization, although progress has varied across different trade corridors and financial instruments.

The comparative economic architectures of the two organizations reveal clear differences in ambition, institutionalization, and impact. The SCO's economic efforts have been framed largely as supportive of its primary security objectives, with connectivity and development viewed as means to enhance stability in Eurasia. This approach has produced incremental gains in infrastructure and energy cooperation but has not generated powerful multilateral financial institutions or far-reaching trade liberalization commitments. BRICS, having placed economic governance at the core of its mandate, has created more autonomous and operationally capable institutions, most notably the New Development Bank, and has sustained a consistent focus on reforming global financial rules. These differences have enabled BRICS to exercise greater influence in international economic discourse and to channel resources toward development priorities across a wider geographic area.

At the same time, both organizations face constraints that limit the effectiveness of their economic architectures. The SCO's consensus-based decision-making and the secondary status of economic issues have slowed the development of robust financial mechanisms. BRICS has achieved more in institution-building but continues to grapple with internal economic divergences and the challenge of coordinating policies among members with different levels of development and financial systems. Neither grouping has displaced bilateral economic relations or other regional frameworks as the primary drivers of trade and investment flows. Nevertheless, the contrasting institutional profiles—one security-led with modest economic adjuncts, the other economically centered with dedicated financial institutions—have produced distinct capabilities that shape their respective contributions to regional and global economic governance. These architectural differences provide essential context for evaluating the relative economic power and influence of the two organizations in the broader international system.

7. Overlapping Memberships and Dual Strategic Engagements

The presence of several states as full or associate members in both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS creates important channels of interaction between the two groupings while also introducing complexities in agenda-setting, decision-making, and strategic alignment. These overlaps are not accidental; they reflect the foreign policy choices of major powers seeking to maximize influence across different multilateral platforms. The resulting dual engagements shape how each organization functions internally and how they relate to one another in the wider landscape of Eurasian and global governance.

Four states hold full membership in both organizations: China, Russia, India, and Iran. This core overlap means that a significant portion of the SCO's membership also participates directly in BRICS summits and institutions. China and Russia, as the most influential members of the SCO and founding participants in BRICS, have consistently used both platforms to advance complementary objectives. For China, the SCO provides a security and connectivity framework centered on Eurasia, while BRICS offers a vehicle for broader global economic and political coordination with other major emerging economies. Russia similarly leverages the SCO for regional security management in Central Asia and the SCO's western reaches, while engaging BRICS to pursue economic diversification and political signaling beyond its immediate neighborhood. The dual participation of these two powers has helped maintain a degree of coherence between the organizations even as their mandates have remained distinct.

India's membership in both groupings illustrates the strategic calculations that dual engagement can accommodate. India joined the SCO in 2017 primarily to gain a seat at the table on Eurasian security issues, particularly those related to Afghanistan, terrorism, and connectivity projects affecting its northern neighborhood. At the same time, India has remained an active participant in BRICS, using the platform to advance its interests in global economic governance, reform of multilateral development banks, and representation of developing countries. This dual presence has required India to navigate tensions arising from its bilateral relations with China and Pakistan within the SCO context, while maintaining a more cooperative posture in BRICS settings where Pakistan is not a member. India's approach demonstrates how overlapping membership can serve as a tool for strategic autonomy, allowing a state to engage selectively with different aspects of each organization's agenda.

Iran's accession to both organizations has added another layer of overlap with distinct regional implications. Iran's full membership in the SCO since 2023 has strengthened the organization's Middle Eastern dimension and its focus on energy security and counter-terrorism. Its simultaneous participation in BRICS has provided a platform for coordinating positions on sanctions, financial autonomy, and energy markets with a wider set of Global South actors. For Iran, dual membership offers complementary avenues for economic and political engagement at

a time when traditional Western channels remain constrained. The overlap has also facilitated informal coordination between the two organizations on issues such as energy cooperation and responses to unilateral economic measures, even in the absence of formal institutional linkages.

Beyond the four shared full members, additional states participate in both groupings at different levels of engagement. Kazakhstan holds full membership in the SCO and partner status in BRICS, allowing it to influence security and connectivity discussions in the former while accessing economic outreach mechanisms in the latter. Belarus, a full SCO member since 2024, also holds partner status in BRICS, reflecting its interest in diversifying partnerships beyond its primary alignment with Russia. These partial overlaps extend the practical interaction between the two organizations without requiring full dual membership for every participant. They also illustrate how states can calibrate their involvement according to the specific strengths of each grouping—security and regional stability in the SCO, economic and financial cooperation in BRICS.

The existence of overlapping memberships has produced both synergies and frictions that affect the internal dynamics of each organization. On the positive side, shared members provide natural conduits for information exchange and policy coordination. Discussions initiated in one forum can be advanced or refined in the other, particularly on cross-cutting issues such as connectivity, energy security, and responses to global economic shocks. The presence of common participants has also encouraged a degree of complementarity, with the SCO focusing on operational security cooperation in Eurasia and BRICS emphasizing global economic governance and development finance. This division of labor has allowed dual members to pursue a coherent overall strategy across platforms rather than treating the organizations as competing alternatives.

At the same time, overlapping memberships have introduced constraints and potential points of tension. The requirement for consensus in both organizations means that any shared member can influence outcomes in both settings, sometimes slowing decision-making or diluting ambitious proposals. India’s participation in the SCO alongside Pakistan, for example, has required careful management to prevent bilateral disputes from paralyzing broader security cooperation. Similarly, India-China tensions, present in both groupings, have occasionally complicated efforts to advance joint initiatives. These dynamics highlight the limits of institutional insulation: while the SCO and BRICS maintain formally separate mandates, the presence of the same states in leadership roles ensures that bilateral and regional rivalries can spill across organizational boundaries.

Dual strategic engagements have also shaped the external perceptions and diplomatic utility of both organizations. For states holding membership in both, participation provides access to distinct networks and capabilities—operational security tools and regional influence through

the SCO, and global economic signaling and financial mechanisms through BRICS. This dual access has proven particularly valuable for middle powers and rising states seeking to diversify partnerships and hedge against over-reliance on any single framework. For the organizations themselves, overlapping membership has reinforced their roles as complementary rather than competitive elements within the emerging multipolar architecture. The shared participation of major powers has helped prevent the development of zero-sum dynamics between the two groupings and has encouraged pragmatic coordination on issues of mutual concern.

The pattern of overlapping memberships and dual engagements thus constitutes a defining structural feature of the contemporary relationship between the SCO and BRICS. It creates pathways for synergy while embedding the organizations within the same web of bilateral and regional relationships that shape member behavior. Understanding these overlaps is essential for assessing how each grouping converts its institutional and membership resources into influence, and for evaluating the prospects for deeper coordination or continued parallel development between them.

8. Economic Power Metrics: Scale, Growth Trajectories, and Global Reach

Economic power in international relations can be assessed through multiple quantitative and qualitative indicators, including aggregate output, growth dynamics, demographic weight, trade and investment flows, and the capacity to shape global financial rules. When measured against these criteria, BRICS demonstrates substantially greater scale and global reach than the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while the SCO retains notable strengths in specific resource and regional connectivity domains. These differences stem directly from contrasting membership compositions, institutional priorities, and the degree to which each organization has developed dedicated economic and financial mechanisms.

BRICS commands a commanding position in global economic aggregates. Its eleven members collectively account for a significant and growing share of world output, with estimates placing their combined GDP at purchasing power parity above 35 percent of the global total and continuing to rise. This share exceeds that of the G7 in PPP terms and reflects the inclusion of the world's two most populous nations alongside other large emerging economies. Nominal GDP figures, while lower due to currency valuations, still position the grouping as a major force in international trade and investment. The presence of China as the world's second-largest economy, India as a rapidly ascending major economy, and resource-rich members such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates gives BRICS substantial weight in global commodity markets, manufacturing supply chains, and services trade.

Demographic scale reinforces BRICS economic metrics. The grouping represents nearly half of the world's population, providing a vast internal market, labor force, and consumer base that supports long-term growth potential. This human capital dimension has become increasingly important as member economies move up value chains and expand domestic consumption. Growth trajectories within BRICS have generally outpaced global averages in recent years, with several members maintaining annual expansion rates well above those of advanced economies. Although individual performance varies—China's growth has moderated from earlier peaks while India has sustained higher rates—the overall trajectory points to continued convergence with developed economies and increasing influence over global demand patterns. These dynamics have enabled BRICS to project itself as the primary engine of future world economic growth.

The institutional architecture supporting BRICS economic power adds a qualitative dimension beyond raw aggregates. The New Development Bank has established itself as a functional multilateral lender focused on infrastructure and sustainable development, issuing bonds in member currencies and approving projects across multiple sectors. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement provides a supplementary layer of financial resilience. Efforts to expand local-currency settlement and develop alternative payment mechanisms have gained momentum, contributing to gradual shifts in the international use of currencies. While these initiatives have not yet displaced the dollar's dominant role, they represent concrete steps toward greater autonomy in financial transactions among members and partner countries. BRICS summits have also sustained consistent advocacy for reform of the IMF, World Bank, and other global institutions, enhancing the grouping's discursive power in debates over international economic governance.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization presents a more modest economic profile when measured by the same aggregate indicators. Its ten members generate a smaller combined share of global GDP than BRICS, with output heavily concentrated in China, Russia, and India. The remaining Central Asian members and newer entrants contribute important resource endowments and strategic locations but add relatively less to overall economic scale. Energy resources represent a notable strength: several SCO members rank among the world's leading producers and exporters of oil, natural gas, and minerals, giving the organization influence over critical supply chains. However, this resource profile has not translated into coordinated pricing power or unified energy policy comparable to specialized producer groupings.

Growth trajectories within the SCO are similarly uneven. China and India have been the primary drivers of expansion, while Russia and several Central Asian economies have experienced more variable performance influenced by commodity cycles and external sanctions. The organization's economic initiatives have focused on facilitating intra-regional trade, developing

transport corridors, and advancing energy infrastructure projects. These efforts have produced measurable increases in cross-border connectivity, particularly between Central Asia and major markets in China and Russia. Yet the absence of a robust multilateral development bank and the secondary status of economic cooperation relative to security priorities have limited the SCO's capacity to mobilize large-scale financing or harmonize regulatory frameworks at the pace seen in other regional arrangements.

Global reach further differentiates the economic power of the two organizations. BRICS operates across four continents and has positioned itself as the leading intergovernmental voice of the Global South. Its summits attract attention from a wide array of developing countries seeking partnership or future membership, and its declarations on economic governance resonate beyond the core membership. The geographic diversity of BRICS members enables engagement with multiple regional markets simultaneously and supports outreach through partner country mechanisms. This global orientation has enhanced the grouping's ability to influence international economic narratives and to coordinate positions in forums such as the G20.

The SCO's economic influence remains more regionally concentrated within Eurasia. Its strength lies in practical connectivity projects that link Central Asia with larger economies and in the political coordination that supports major infrastructure initiatives. While these efforts contribute to the economic resilience of member states and enhance the organization's role as a facilitator of Eurasian integration, they have not generated comparable global visibility or agenda-setting power in international financial institutions. The SCO's economic activities are often viewed as complementary to, rather than competitive with, broader global economic governance debates.

Institutional and structural factors help explain these differences in economic metrics. BRICS has invested more heavily in dedicated financial institutions and has maintained a consistent focus on global economic reform, enabling it to convert member economic weight into institutional and discursive influence. The SCO's security-centric origins and consensus-based governance have channeled economic cooperation toward supporting regional stability rather than building autonomous global financial mechanisms. Resource endowments and geographic location provide the SCO with specific advantages in energy and Eurasian transit, yet these have not offset the aggregate scale and institutional development advantages held by BRICS.

The resulting asymmetry in economic power metrics has clear implications for the comparative roles of the two organizations. BRICS possesses greater capacity to shape global economic discourse, mobilize development finance, and represent a broad coalition of emerging economies. The SCO offers more targeted influence over regional connectivity and resource flows within Eurasia. These distinct profiles mean that the organizations exercise economic

power in different domains and through different instruments, with limited direct competition between them. Understanding these metrics provides a foundation for assessing how each grouping's economic capabilities interact with its security posture and overall contribution to the evolving international order.

9. Security and Regional Influence: Capabilities, Exercises, and Projection

Security capabilities and regional influence represent one of the clearest areas of divergence between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. The SCO has developed substantial operational mechanisms, institutional structures, and practical experience in addressing transnational security challenges within Eurasia. BRICS, by design and historical evolution, possesses no comparable security mandate, institutions, or operational capabilities. This asymmetry gives the SCO a distinct advantage in hard security cooperation and regional stabilization, while BRICS has concentrated its influence in economic and political domains.

The SCO's security capabilities rest on a combination of permanent institutional mechanisms and regular operational activities. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent serves as the central hub for intelligence sharing, database management, and coordination against terrorism, separatism, and extremism. RATS maintains lists of designated organizations and individuals, facilitates information exchange among member security services, and supports joint training programs. These functions have proven particularly relevant in managing threats emanating from Afghanistan and in countering cross-border militant networks. Although RATS lacks independent enforcement authority, its role in standardizing procedures and building professional networks among member agencies has contributed to improved situational awareness and preventive action across the region.

Joint military exercises constitute the most visible demonstration of SCO security capabilities. The "Peace Mission" series and related drills have grown in scale and complexity since their inception, involving thousands of personnel, advanced equipment, and increasingly sophisticated scenarios. These exercises enhance interoperability among member armed forces, test command-and-control procedures, and provide opportunities for confidence-building among states with varying levels of military capability. Participation by all full members, including newer entrants, has required adaptation to differing operational cultures and equipment standards, yet the organization has maintained a consistent schedule of exercises that reinforce collective security habits. Beyond large-scale maneuvers, the SCO has conducted smaller specialized drills focused on counter-terrorism tactics, border security, and protection of critical infrastructure.

Regional influence derived from these capabilities is most evident in Central Asia and the broader Eurasian space. The SCO has provided a multilateral framework for managing border issues, coordinating responses to instability in Afghanistan, and addressing shared concerns over radicalization and drug trafficking. Member states have used SCO mechanisms to legitimize domestic security measures and to coordinate policies toward external actors operating in the region. The organization's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference has made it an attractive platform for states seeking security cooperation without the intrusive conditionality sometimes associated with Western-led initiatives. This approach has enabled the SCO to maintain relevance even as individual members pursue parallel security relationships with other partners.

The expansion of membership has extended the SCO's security reach while introducing new complexities. India and Pakistan's accession brought two nuclear-armed states with a history of conflict into the security architecture, requiring careful management to prevent bilateral tensions from undermining organizational cohesion. Iran's membership has added perspectives on Middle Eastern security dynamics and energy infrastructure protection. Belarus's accession has reinforced the organization's western dimension. Despite these changes, the core security mandate and operational mechanisms have remained intact, demonstrating institutional resilience. The SCO's ability to absorb diverse members while preserving functional cooperation in counter-terrorism and military exercises distinguishes it from groupings that have struggled to translate expansion into operational effectiveness.

BRICS maintains no dedicated security institutions, operational mechanisms, or mandate for military cooperation. Its founding documents and subsequent declarations have consistently prioritized economic governance, development finance, and political coordination over security matters. No equivalent to RATS exists within BRICS, and the organization has never conducted joint military exercises or established intelligence-sharing protocols. Security issues occasionally appear in summit declarations in the form of general statements on terrorism or regional conflicts, but these remain declaratory rather than operational. The absence of security architecture reflects both the original economic rationale of the grouping and the deliberate choice of members to avoid entanglements that could complicate participation by states with divergent security alignments.

This lack of security capabilities does not mean BRICS is irrelevant to regional security dynamics. Its members include major military powers whose bilateral and minilateral security relationships operate independently of the BRICS framework. The grouping's global reach and emphasis on multipolarity have allowed it to serve as a platform for political signaling on security-related issues, such as opposition to unilateral sanctions or calls for negotiated solutions to conflicts. However, these activities remain at the level of diplomatic coordination rather than operational

cooperation. BRICS has not developed mechanisms for crisis response, conflict prevention, or military confidence-building comparable to those institutionalized within the SCO.

The comparative assessment of security power therefore reveals a pronounced asymmetry. The SCO possesses tangible operational capabilities, regular exercise programs, and a functioning institutional framework that enable it to influence security outcomes within its Eurasian region. These assets have contributed to reduced cross-border militant activity, improved coordination among security services, and a stable multilateral channel for managing sensitive issues among neighboring states. BRICS, while including powerful military actors among its members, has no collective security instruments and exercises no direct influence over operational security matters. Its strength in this domain is limited to political rhetoric and the indirect effects of its economic initiatives on regional stability.

This divergence in security capabilities has important implications for the overall roles of the two organizations. The SCO functions as a meaningful actor in Eurasian security governance, filling a niche that BRICS does not occupy. Its regional influence derives from practical cooperation rather than aggregate military power or global visibility. BRICS, by concentrating on economic and political domains, has avoided the complexities of security coordination among members with competing interests, preserving cohesion in its primary areas of focus. The resulting division of labor—SCO dominance in regional security operations and BRICS strength in global economic signaling—means that the two organizations exercise influence in largely separate spheres, with limited direct competition in the security domain. Understanding this asymmetry is essential for evaluating their complementary contributions to the broader multipolar order.

10. Synergies, Complementarities, and Inherent Tensions

The relationship between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS is characterized by a mixture of synergies, complementarities, and inherent tensions arising from overlapping memberships, differing mandates, and the geopolitical realities of their shared participants. Rather than functioning as direct competitors, the two organizations have developed largely parallel tracks of activity that occasionally intersect through common members. This pattern has enabled pragmatic coordination on select issues while also exposing limits imposed by internal rivalries and divergent institutional cultures.

Synergies emerge most clearly in areas where the distinct strengths of each organization can reinforce one another. The SCO's operational focus on Eurasian security, border management, and counter-terrorism provides a stable regional environment that supports the broader economic connectivity goals pursued within BRICS. Major infrastructure and energy projects

advanced under SCO political auspices can contribute to the development priorities financed through BRICS mechanisms such as the New Development Bank. Shared members have at times used discussions in one forum to build momentum for initiatives in the other, particularly on issues such as transport corridors, energy security, and responses to external economic pressures. The presence of common participants creates informal channels for information exchange and policy alignment that would be less accessible if the organizations operated in complete isolation.

Complementarities are evident in the division of labor between regional security stabilization and global economic coordination. The SCO has developed practical mechanisms for managing transnational threats and enhancing military confidence within Eurasia, functions that fall outside BRICS's mandate and institutional capacity. BRICS, in turn, has constructed platforms for advocating reforms in global financial governance and channeling development finance across multiple continents, areas where the SCO's regionally concentrated and security-centric profile offers limited reach. For states holding membership in both groupings, this division allows selective engagement: using the SCO to address immediate regional security concerns and BRICS to pursue wider economic and political objectives. The resulting combination expands the toolkit available to dual members without requiring either organization to stretch beyond its core competencies.

Shared members serve as the primary bridges facilitating these synergies and complementarities. China and Russia have consistently participated in both organizations at high levels, using each platform to advance overlapping strategic interests. Their dual engagement has helped maintain a degree of coherence between the groupings even as their mandates have remained distinct. India has leveraged its presence in both to balance regional security engagement in the SCO with global economic positioning in BRICS. Iran has similarly used dual membership to coordinate positions on energy markets and responses to external pressures. These overlapping participations create natural points of intersection where policy positions developed in one setting can inform approaches in the other, reducing the risk of contradictory stances by the same state across different multilateral forums.

Inherent tensions arise from several sources. Bilateral and regional rivalries among shared members, most notably India-China and India-Pakistan dynamics, exist within both organizations and can constrain ambitious joint initiatives. The consensus-based decision-making procedures common to both groupings amplify these frictions, as any shared member can block or dilute proposals that conflict with its bilateral priorities. Differences in institutional culture and primary focus—security and operational cooperation in the SCO versus economic governance and global signaling in BRICS—can also produce misalignments when issues straddle both domains. For example, connectivity projects promoted within the SCO for security

and stability reasons may intersect with BRICS economic initiatives in ways that require careful coordination to avoid duplication or conflicting standards.

Geopolitical divergences among members further complicate the relationship. While both organizations articulate support for multipolarity and greater autonomy from Western-led institutions, individual members maintain varied alignments and strategic partnerships outside these frameworks. These external relationships can create competing pressures that limit the depth of coordination between the SCO and BRICS. The differing geographic scopes—one predominantly Eurasian, the other global—also mean that priorities emphasized in one setting may receive less attention in the other, requiring dual members to manage expectations and resource allocation across platforms.

Despite these tensions, both organizations have demonstrated a capacity for pragmatic management of divergences. Issues that generate sharp disagreement are often compartmentalized or addressed at the lowest common denominator level, preserving organizational cohesion on matters where consensus exists. Shared members have generally avoided forcing confrontations that could damage either grouping, preferring instead to advance initiatives where interests align. This approach has allowed the SCO and BRICS to expand and deepen cooperation in their respective domains while maintaining workable relations between them.

The overall pattern of synergies, complementarities, and managed tensions suggests that the SCO and BRICS function more as parallel and occasionally intersecting components of a broader multipolar architecture than as rival blocs. Their overlapping memberships create both opportunities for coordination and constraints on deeper integration. The resulting relationship has proven sufficiently flexible to accommodate internal diversity and external pressures, enabling each organization to pursue its core mandate while benefiting from the existence of the other. This dynamic has important implications for how shared members navigate an increasingly complex international environment and for the prospects of further alignment between regional security frameworks and global economic coalitions.

11. Implications for Eurasian Stability and the Broader Multipolar Order

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS exert distinct yet interrelated influences on Eurasian stability and the evolving multipolar international order. The SCO has developed concrete mechanisms that contribute to regional security management in Central Asia and adjacent areas, while BRICS has advanced a broader political and economic narrative that challenges aspects of the existing global governance system. Their overlapping memberships create pathways through which these regional and global effects can interact, producing a

complex pattern of stabilization and systemic pressure that shapes the strategic environment for both members and external actors.

The SCO's primary contribution to Eurasian stability lies in its operational focus on transnational threats and border management. Through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and regular joint exercises, the organization has facilitated intelligence sharing and coordinated responses to militant networks operating across the region. This cooperation has been particularly relevant in addressing risks associated with instability in Afghanistan, including the potential spillover of extremist groups and narcotics trafficking. By providing a multilateral framework acceptable to all Central Asian states as well as China and Russia, the SCO has helped prevent the fragmentation of security policies that could have exacerbated regional vulnerabilities. Its emphasis on sovereignty and consensus has enabled states with differing internal security challenges to cooperate without external conditionality, thereby reinforcing state capacity in a strategically sensitive area.

Beyond counter-terrorism, the SCO has supported stability through political coordination on border issues and confidence-building measures. The organization's origins in post-Soviet border negotiations established patterns of dialogue that have endured and expanded. These mechanisms have reduced the likelihood of militarized disputes among members and created channels for managing tensions arising from ethnic minorities, resource disputes, and great-power competition in Central Asia. The inclusion of newer members has extended this stabilizing function westward and southward, incorporating perspectives on European and South Asian security dynamics while maintaining the core focus on Eurasian connectivity and threat mitigation.

BRICS has had more limited direct impact on Eurasian stability but has contributed significantly to the broader multipolar order through its economic and political activities. By establishing the New Development Bank and advocating for reforms in global financial institutions, BRICS has created alternative channels for development finance and increased the visibility of emerging economy perspectives in international economic governance. Its summits have provided a recurring platform for coordinating positions on issues such as unilateral sanctions, multilateral reform, and the representation of the Global South. These efforts have not displaced existing institutions but have added pressure for greater inclusivity and have offered member states additional options for economic engagement and political signaling.

The interaction between the two organizations through overlapping memberships amplifies their combined systemic effects. Dual members can draw on SCO mechanisms for regional security stabilization while using BRICS platforms to pursue global economic objectives and multipolar advocacy. This combination allows states to address immediate regional challenges through one framework and longer-term structural shifts through the other, creating a layered

approach to autonomy in international affairs. The presence of shared participants has also encouraged informal coordination on cross-cutting issues such as energy security and connectivity, where regional operational cooperation and global economic initiatives can reinforce one another.

Limitations and constraints temper these contributions. Internal rivalries among shared members, particularly India-China and India-Pakistan tensions, have periodically complicated consensus in both organizations and restricted the scope of ambitious joint initiatives. The consensus-based decision-making procedures common to both have slowed responses to rapidly evolving situations and have favored lowest-common-denominator outcomes over bold collective action. Neither organization possesses the institutional depth or enforcement mechanisms of traditional alliances, limiting their ability to impose binding commitments or resolve fundamental disagreements among members. These constraints mean that while both groupings enhance options for their members, they do not constitute unified or highly integrated power centers capable of consistently overriding bilateral interests.

Interactions with external actors further shape the implications of both organizations. The SCO has maintained pragmatic relations with other regional bodies and has avoided direct confrontation with Western security structures, focusing instead on functional cooperation within its geographic remit. BRICS has positioned itself more explicitly as an advocate for systemic change in global governance, yet its members continue to participate actively in Western-led institutions such as the G20 and IMF. This dual engagement by individual members has prevented either organization from becoming an outright alternative bloc and has instead produced a pattern of parallel participation that increases diplomatic flexibility for states navigating a multipolar environment.

Looking forward, the trajectories of the SCO and BRICS suggest continued parallel development rather than convergence into a single integrated structure. The SCO is likely to deepen operational security cooperation and connectivity initiatives within Eurasia while managing the complexities introduced by its expanded membership. BRICS is positioned to expand its financial mechanisms and global outreach, potentially incorporating additional partners and strengthening the New Development Bank's role. The overlapping memberships will continue to serve as transmission belts between these regional and global tracks, enabling selective coordination while also transmitting tensions when bilateral disputes intensify.

The combined effect on the international system is therefore one of incremental pluralization rather than fundamental rupture. By offering functional cooperation in security and economic domains outside traditional Western frameworks, the SCO and BRICS have increased the strategic options available to their members and to other states observing their development. This has contributed to a more diffuse distribution of influence in which no single set of

institutions monopolizes either regional stabilization or global economic governance. The resulting multipolar order remains characterized by overlapping memberships, managed rivalries, and pragmatic compartmentalization, with the SCO and BRICS serving as important but partial components of a larger and still evolving architecture.

12. Conclusions, Future Scenarios, and Research Directions

The comparative analysis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS reveals two multilateral frameworks that have pursued distinct pathways toward greater autonomy in international affairs while sharing important points of intersection through overlapping memberships. The SCO has consolidated operational capabilities in Eurasian security, counter-terrorism, and regional stabilization, supported by permanent institutions and regular military cooperation. BRICS has developed more ambitious economic and financial mechanisms, most notably the New Development Bank, and has positioned itself as a leading voice for Global South interests in global governance reform. These differing mandates have produced asymmetric profiles: the SCO exercises meaningful regional influence through practical security cooperation, while BRICS commands greater aggregate economic scale and global discursive power.

Overlapping memberships, particularly the shared full participation of China, Russia, India, and Iran, have created both opportunities for coordination and sources of friction. Dual members have used the two organizations to address complementary needs—regional security stabilization through the SCO and broader economic and political positioning through BRICS—while internal rivalries have periodically constrained ambitious joint action in both settings. The resulting relationship is best characterized as one of managed parallelism rather than integration or direct competition. Each organization has expanded its membership and institutional reach in recent years without fundamentally altering its core orientation, demonstrating resilience amid internal diversity and external pressures.

Future scenarios for the two organizations are likely to involve continued parallel development with selective coordination on issues of mutual interest. The SCO may deepen its operational security mechanisms and connectivity initiatives within Eurasia, potentially strengthening the role of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and advancing discussions around a dedicated development bank. BRICS is positioned to expand the New Development Bank's lending capacity, further develop local-currency financial instruments, and incorporate additional partners through its outreach mechanisms. Greater alignment between the two could emerge around specific functional areas such as energy security, transport corridors, and responses to external economic measures, facilitated by shared members. However, persistent bilateral

tensions among key participants and the consensus-based nature of decision-making in both groupings are likely to limit the scope and speed of deeper institutional convergence.

Alternative trajectories include scenarios in which internal rivalries intensify and constrain cooperation within one or both organizations, or in which external geopolitical shifts prompt more explicit differentiation between the SCO's regional security focus and BRICS's global economic advocacy. Expansion of either grouping could introduce new dynamics: additional members might dilute cohesion or, conversely, bring fresh resources and perspectives that strengthen institutional capacity. The evolution of the broader multipolar environment, including developments in other forums such as the G20 and regional economic arrangements, will also influence how the SCO and BRICS position themselves and interact with external actors.

Directions for future research emerge directly from the gaps and complexities identified in this analysis. Comparative studies could examine the effectiveness of specific mechanisms—such as the SCO's joint exercises versus BRICS's financial instruments—in achieving stated objectives. Research on the consequences of dual membership for state foreign policy behavior would illuminate how countries navigate overlapping commitments and whether participation in both enhances or complicates strategic autonomy. Investigations into the interactions between the SCO, BRICS, and other multilateral institutions could clarify patterns of complementarity or competition in global governance. Longitudinal analysis of how internal rivalries affect organizational performance across different issue areas would provide insight into the limits of consensus-based multilateralism among diverse powers. Finally, studies of public and elite perceptions of these organizations in member and partner states could assess their legitimacy and normative influence beyond formal institutional outputs.

In conclusion, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS represent distinct but intersecting expressions of the contemporary drive toward multipolarity. The SCO has built functional regional security architecture that addresses immediate transnational threats in Eurasia, while BRICS has constructed platforms for economic coordination and global governance reform with wider geographic scope. Their overlapping memberships create bridges for pragmatic interaction, yet inherent tensions rooted in bilateral rivalries and differing priorities prevent the emergence of a unified alternative order. Together, they illustrate how states are constructing layered multilateral options that expand diplomatic and institutional flexibility without requiring wholesale replacement of existing structures. This pattern of parallel and selectively intersecting cooperation is likely to persist as a defining feature of the evolving international system, offering both opportunities for enhanced autonomy and persistent constraints on deeper collective action.

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